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The May 1924 Meinertzhagen record of cranes over London

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In his summary of Common Crane *Grus grus* records for London, the first to be deemed acceptable by Self (2014) was from '1924: Kensington, flock heard at night on 8 May'; the next acceptable record is not until 1973. Reference to the Committee of the London Natural History Society (1957), which also accepted the May 1924 record, reveals the person responsible to be Richard Meinertzhagen, who had published it in an article relating to the seven-acre Kensington Park Gardens. Meinertzhagen (1942) recorded that:

'...one of the most remarkable records for the garden, if not for London, occurred about midnight on May 8th, 1924, when my wife and I were returning from a theatre in a white fog. The unmistakable call of crane was heard, not one but many, passing over at a great height. So penetrating is this call that when migrating it can be heard long before birds come into sight. ... This fine bird, which once bred regularly in the British Islands, doubtless passes over Britain more regularly than is generally realised.'

This record is indeed remarkable, as on that date Meinertzhagen and his wife were engaged in a collecting trip to Madeira, where they arrived by boat on 29 April and departed on 22 May (Meinertzhagen 1925). Although the year of this visit is not mentioned in his paper, Cocker (1989) gave it as 1924 and a check of >30 specimens of species referred to as taken on the trip, now held in the Natural History Museum, Tring, confirms this.

Regarding UK weather for May 1924, 'The number of days of fog during the month was small' (Meteorological Committee 1924). More specifically, the detailed weather register for the South Kensington area for 8 May notes 'Clear night' (Met Office National Meteorological Archive *in litt.* March 2016).

Although our grounds are different, we are not the first to have reason to doubt this record. Among the London Natural History Society bird record cards (now preserved as electronic scans) was one by 'RCH' (almost certainly R. C. Homes) that referred to Meinertzhagen (1942) and stated:

'In conversation with R.S.R. Fitter at Upsala [*sic*] in June 1950 Col. Meinertzhagen said that cranes normally make a direct flight on migration from Spain to Sweden. The ones heard over London were definitely *Grus*, and not demoiselle or sarus, but might possibly have been escaped specimens of one of the Asiatic species of *Grus*. Note: the latter seems unlikely as several birds were heard and in view of Col. Meinertzhagen's experience there seems no reason to doubt his identification of the species, though in the case of such an

unusual record the fact of the birds not being seen suggests square brackets.’ (Record Set 1900 to 1950. Record 00003067. Held by Greenspace Information for Greater London.)

Despite being chairman of the Committee of the London Natural History Society, Homes was evidently in a minority on the need for square brackets when it came to publication. Subsequently, however, Naylor (1996) placed the record in square brackets, based on wider doubts concerning Meinertzhagen records flagged up by Knox (1993).

It is of course possible that Meinertzhagen simply got the date wrong, but his now well-established deceptions involving bird specimens (Knox 1993, Rasmussen & Collar 1999, Rasmussen & Prŷs-Jones 2003) clearly also carried over into his published anecdotes. For example, his assertion that he observed Raso Lark *Alauda razae* in the field (Meinertzhagen 1951) is demonstrably untrue (Collar & Stuart 1985), while his claim to have been in a position to assassinate Adolf Hitler on 28 June 1939 (Meinertzhagen 1959) has been exposed as fabrication (Garfield 2007). In the circumstances, therefore, we recommend that this record of *G. grus* be deleted from the London list. However, it should be noted in passing that Meinertzhagen’s (second) wife, the ornithologist Annie Jackson, is in no way implicated regarding this record, as she died in 1928.

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